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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Iranian Factionalism in Perspective

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Summary

We believe the Iranian leadership is firmly united on its strategic goal of undermining the US role in the Persian Gulf. Apparent differences within the leadership that do surface over Iran's Gulf policy are over the tactics Tehran should employ and not goals. Nonetheless, the Khomeini regime does remain deeply divided over other domestic and foreign policy issues.

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Differences Among US Analysts

Most Intelligence Community analysts agree that serious differences exist within the Iranian leadership over several key issues. These disputes center on the proper degree of government intervention in the economy, the desirability of land reform, and on how aggressive Iran should be in trying to export its revolutionary Islamic ideals. The differences have persisted in part because Ayatollah Khomeini has never adopted an unequivocal position on these issues. In fact, Khomeini has sometimes tilted toward one faction, sometimes toward another to try to prevent any one group from becoming too powerful.

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This paper was prepared by [] the Persian Gulf Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA,

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[redacted]

Some Community analysts contend that the factional disputes also influence Iran's policy toward the US reflagging program. These analysts argue that the Iranian leadership is divided between hardliners, who seek confrontation with the United States, and those who think Iran should defuse tensions and accommodate itself to the US presence. They argue that Iran has shifted its policy several times since the US escort program began between belligerency (mining, harsh rhetoric, inciting riots at Mecca) and conciliation--for example, showing apparent flexibility on the UN ceasefire resolution. [redacted]

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Agency analysts do not share this view. In our judgment, Iran's ability to coordinate a campaign of military actions, diplomacy, and terrorism to work against US and Gulf State resolve and reduce Iran's international isolation reflects a strong degree of cohesiveness among the leadership on these issues. Hostility toward the United States has always been a fundamental element of the Khomeini regime's outlook and Ayatollah Khomeini repeatedly has publicly rejected compromise with Washington. We believe that Tehran views the US military buildup as a threat to the survival of the Islamic Republic as well as to Iran's goal of hegemony in the Gulf. [redacted]

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Nature of the Evidence

[redacted]

Judgments on this question [redacted] depend primarily upon how one evaluates Iranian behavior and how one assesses the influence of the leadership's ideology upon their actions. [redacted]

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Khomeini Weighs In

Unlike other issues confronting the Iranian leadership in which factionalism has been a persistent problem, Ayatollah Khomeini has issued clear public guidelines on dealing with the increased US involvement in the Gulf. In a speech in May, in which Khomeini apparently was referring to the US decision to escort Kuwaiti tankers, he called the United States the most barbaric nation in the world and said that compromising with the United States would mean Iran's destruction. Following the 20 September US attack on the Iran Ajr, Iranian officials stated publicly that Khomeini had met with them and called again for no compromise with the United States or in the war with Iraq. [redacted]

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The Clerics' World View

We believe that the Khomeini regime's view of the world lies behind the leadership's determination to confront the United States. Hostility toward the United States is a fundamental element of the clerics' outlook. This animosity derives from the clerics' perception of the US-Iranian relationship under the Shah and of the threat that the West--and the United States as its leader--presents to Islam. They see the great power of the United States not only as a direct threat to the survival of the Iranian revolution but also as the main obstacle to their divinely-inspired obligation to spread Islam throughout the world. Of all the Western nations, the United States is seen in Iranian eyes as the most threatening because it epitomizes the cultural seduction of the West's materialism, secularism, and sexual liberalism that threatens to lead Muslims away from traditional Islamic values. [REDACTED]

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In our judgment, Tehran believes the US military buildup in the Gulf threatens Iran's goal of victory in the war with Iraq and the overthrow of Iraqi President Saddam Husayn. Success in the war has become synonymous for Khomeini and other Iranian leaders with the success of the revolution. Tehran believes that the US military buildup in the Gulf is intended to save the Iraqi regime from collapse by boosting Iraqi morale, to block Iranian efforts to pressure Iraq's Gulf allies, and to set the stage for direct US intervention to destroy Iran's warmaking capability. [REDACTED]

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Iranian leaders also appear to believe that the increased US role in the Gulf represents a long-term threat to Iran's goal of regional hegemony and that it will alter the balance of power in the Gulf against Iran. The Iranians fear that the US presence will persuade the Gulf states that they can oppose Iranian policies with impunity. [REDACTED]

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We believe that the increased US involvement in the Gulf has helped to shift the Iranian leadership toward more hardline policies. Iranian leaders now must demonstrate their eagerness to confront the United States or risk having their revolutionary credentials questioned. Assembly Speaker Rafsanjani, who has emerged as the second most powerful leader in Iran and the front runner to wield effective power after Khomeini dies, reflects the shift. Prior to the US decision to reflag Kuwaiti tankers, Rafsanjani's public statements did not completely rule out an eventual improvement in relations with the United States. Since the US decision, however, Rafsanjani has adopted an uncompromisingly hostile and confrontational stance toward the United States. He almost certainly believes that the current situation offers an opportunity to erase any doubts about him created by his role in the arms-for-hostages deals with the United States. Rafsanjani may also believe that he can solidify his relationship with radicals in the leadership, whose control of the country's armed groups will make their support critical after Khomeini dies, if he successfully manages Iran through the current period. [REDACTED]

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Iranian Actions and Statements

[redacted] even before the US escort program began, the Iranian leadership was shaping an overall plan for a protracted struggle to force Washington to retreat in the Persian Gulf. Iran's military plans for meeting the anticipated threat from the United States and Iraq as we are aware of them showed no willingness to compromise. They indicated that the Iranians expect major US retaliation at some point [redacted]

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Iranian actions and public remarks since the US escort program began show that Tehran remains committed to the broad outlines of its strategy and reinforce our view of a unified leadership whose resolve remains unshaken. Iranian leaders' statements have been remarkably consistent with one another both in tone and in substance and uniformly have supported Iranian actions. Iran's primary spokesmen, Assembly Speaker Rafsanjani, Prime Minister Musavi, and President Khamenei, have articulated the same theme: that the US presence is intended to undermine the Islamic Republic and Islam itself by preventing Iran from achieving its goal of defeating Iraq. The speeches contain a blend of bellicose rhetoric intended to rally Iranian domestic opinion and to create anxiety in the United States about the consequences of US policy, along with offers of Iranian restraint if only the United States and Iraq stop their provocations in the Gulf. [redacted]

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Despite this cohesiveness, we believe some differences exist within the leadership over specific military moves Tehran should use to achieve its objectives. [redacted]

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We do not believe that the combination of conciliatory and confrontational tactics that Iran has used in the Gulf reflects factional differences over the country's strategic aims. In our judgment these tactics are consistent with Tehran's conduct of its foreign policy over the last several years. Iran has used military and terrorist actions against the United States and the Gulf States to demonstrate that it is not intimidated by the US presence and that the Gulf states cannot escape an expanded conflict. Tehran also has sought through diplomatic overtures to Moscow, Western Europe, and the Gulf States to reduce its diplomatic isolation and to undercut support for US efforts to pressure Tehran to end the war. [redacted]

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The unity and cohesiveness of the Iranian leadership on confrontation with the United States is particularly evident in Tehran's response to the UN Security Council's efforts to arrange a ceasefire in the war. Although the clerics have not abandoned their goal of achieving victory over Iraq, they have worked to appear flexible in order to blunt efforts by the United States and other countries to pressure Tehran to end the war. UN Secretary General Perez de Cuellar reported that when he visited Tehran all Iranian leaders put forward the same basic position, even though he met separately with each of them at Tehran's insistence. [REDACTED]

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